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SMC and Campolindo represented at Olympic Marathon Trials

By Jon Kingdon



Sara Mostatabi, second from right Photos provided

It was Henry Kaiser (1882-1967), a famous American industrialist that said: "Taste the relish to be found in competition - in having put forth the best within you." Kaiser's words and sentiments speak to the attitude and strength that marathoners bring to their sport.

Runners competed Feb. 29 in Atlanta to be among the top three finishers for the men and women to earn a position on the United States Olympic team. Among the runners were Sara Mostatabi, a 2011 Campolindo graduate and Rajpaul (Raj) Pannu who graduated from Saint Mary's College in 2014.

The United States Olympic Committee did not make it easy for any of the runners. "There were 20 to 30-mile gusts that day plus you gained 1,400 feet of elevation which is generally unheard of," said Mostatabi. "It was also a hilly course along with 34 meaningful turns where you lost your momentum."

Pannu added, "It was probably the most brutal course ever for the Olympic trials."

There were 735 runners (250 men and 485 women) that began the race and only 565 were able to complete the course. Pannu's time was 2:20:55, finishing in 63rd place out of the 175 men that finished the race. Mostatabi's time was 2:43:28 and finished in 91st place out of the 390 women that made it to the finish line.

With support from her boyfriend, family and friends from high school and college along with her high school coach Chuck Woolridge at the race, it was all positive for Mostatabi as she surpassed her expectations: "This was definitely a highlight of my running career. I had the goal of beating my seeded place (156) and I wanted to finish in the top third of the race and to be among the top 100 runners so it became a dream come true."

Mostatabi had been training with his former Saint Mary's coach, Marty Kinsey, and had to battle through a number of injuries. "Raj was out for months and then slowly built himself back, starting six months prior to the trials by running just two miles," Kinsey said. "Considering where he began, to be in the top 25% of the field was pretty cool."

Mostatabi who works as a math teacher for ninth-graders at the Impact Academy of the Arts and Technology, a public charter school in Hayward, was more pleased than ecstatic at the end of the race: "I felt so relieved to be honest. The grind of the last several months of working full time as an educator and then working out in the cold and the dark, it was a very isolated lifestyle. It was also bittersweet knowing that I could have been in the top 20 if I had been able to have a full training load in preparation."

Mostatabi and Pannu each discovered, as freshmen in high school, that they had an innate talent for running distances.

Pannu was recruited from Diablo Valley College to Saint Mary's by Kinsey: "My goal was to turn Raj into an Olympics Marathon Trials Qualifier which was absurd to throw out there. When he raced, you could see him putting his body through another level of pain. It's visible and that's something that you can't coach, and I knew that if we could get him training at a higher level with his desire to push the limits, it would be a good combination." During his career at Saint Mary's, Pannu held the school records in 800, 1500, 5,000 and 10,000 meters.

To qualify for the Olympic trials, a runner must beat a set time at their chosen marathon. For Mostatabi, it was "Grandma's Marathon" in Duluth, Minnesota, where she ran 2:41:14, easily beating the required Olympic time of 2:45:00. Pannu qualified for the Olympic trails at the California International Marathon in Sacramento, a feat he took almost casually: "I spent months visualizing what I was going to do. I anticipated running a 2:16:58 second and I was only seven seconds off that."

Mostatabi, who grew up in Moraga and works as a senior associate at The Riverside Company in Santa Monica where she assesses new acquisition opportunities, attributes much of her academic success at Claremont-McKenna College and athletic success to her time at Campolindo. "As our track coach, Chuck poured himself into the runners that gave the sport and him the respect that it deserved. It speaks volumes to the fact that I'm still in touch with him and he came to support me in Atlanta. I consider him a friend now and feel lucky to have him in my life."

Saint Mary's was a special place for Pannu: "Saint Mary's means community to me. There is a feeling of community and I just really liked the mission statement which was serving. Coach Kinsey was incredibly patient with me. I was injured my sophomore year and he still supported me in so many ways and he went to bat for me which allowed me to give 110% for Saint Mary's."

For Woolridge, his favorite memory against Mostatabi was at the 2008 Olympic trials at Hayward Field in Oregon, sitting in the stands with Sara, who was one of two kids that Woolridge took up there for that week to watch the trials. "Twelve years later, she is running in the Olympic trials and I thought that was a

pretty amazing journey," Woolridge said. When Mostatabi told him that she had qualified to run in the trials, Woolridge told her he would be booking his flight. "I have an unwritten rule that if any of my kids make it to the Olympic trials, I'm going to be there."

Mostatabi and Pannu, though satisfied with their performances see it more as a steppingstone: "I absolutely want to try running again in the trials with a goal of running 2:37:00," said Mostatabi. "I want to reach the A standard which is my next goal."

Pannu's first goal is to take some downtime: "I want to get my body healthy, starting from the ground up but in the long term my goal is to run a 2:12:00 marathon which would make me an elite among the elites which I think is my capability. I just have to make sure that my body is ready to handle that workload so I'm going to make sure that I'm healthy. I want to try out for the next Olympic trials but a lot can happen in four years. There are just so many things that can happen and nothing is set in stone."



Rajpaul Pannu

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[back](#)

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